ARTICLE APPEARED ON PAGE 1A

BALTIMORE SUN
8 May 1987

McFarlane calls contras 'inept bottlers and clerks'

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WASHINGTON — Robert C. McFarlane, President Reagan's former national security adviser, branded the U.S.-backed Nicaraguan rebels as incompetent "Coca-Cola bottlers and clerks" who are incapable of succeeding in combat against the Sandinista armed forces.

"They're well-meaning, patriotic but inept Coca-Cola bottlers and clerks," said Mr. McFarlane, who made his remarks in two lengthy recent interviews with *The Sun*. "Their solid figures apparently enjoy substantial support, but they are incompetent. They just cannot hack it on the battlefield."

The indictment of the rebels was general, but the phrase "Coca-Cola bottlers" apparently referred to Adolfo Calero, one of the guerrillas' three major leaders, formerly the manager of the Coca-Cola bottling plant in Nicaragua.

Mr. McFarlane's comments came as the president reaffirmed his support for the rebels, known as contras, and sought to intensify pressure on Congress to approve a new $105 million contra-support package.

Speaking to newspaper publishers in New York last Sunday, Mr. Reagan said, "For as long as I am president, I have no intention of withdrawing our support" from the contras.

The McFarlane assessment of the contras is the most negative ever by a high Reagan administration official, past or present, and could severely damage the rebels' cause on Capitol Hill, where his opinion was accorded great weight when he was promoting the policy.

Mr. McFarlane, a central figure in the Iran-contra affair and a survivor of a Feb. 9 suicide attempt, said he never conveyed the extent of his doubts about the battlefield deficiencies of the guerrillas to President Reagan before he left office in December 1985, and has not done so since.

He defended his silence by saying that until his final months in office, he believed the contras had a slim chance to prevail if they improved what he suggested was a dismal combat record and broadened their political base to gain greater popular support.

But Mr. McFarlane made clear at other points in the interviews that, despite his seemingly lofty position, he lacked the stature within the administration to persuade the president that the policy was not working and required a radical change in direction.

"I wasn't able to say, 'Hold the phone, let's turn this thing around,' " he said.

Asked his current opinion of the contras' ability to prevail, he said, "I think it is unlikely that either the political or military competence is there."

He did not relate specifically what he felt needed to be done now, saying he preferred to save that for when he testifies, perhaps as early as today, before the Senate and House select committees investigating the Iran-contra scandal.

But he did say that in 1981, when he was working at the State Department, he concluded that the best method of forestalling what he called "the consolidation of another Marxist regime in this hemisphere" was an air and naval blockade of Nicaragua.

He said his boss at the time, then-Secretary of State Alexander M. Haig, never sent the proposal on to the White House because he felt it would be impossible to gain popular support for such action.

In the interviews, which were conducted under strict ground rules that prohibited questioning on details of Iran-contra matters and precluded publication until today, Mr. McFarlane also offered a devastating portrayal of the Reagan administration's foreign policy apparatus.

He painted a picture of feuding Cabinet officials, notably Secretary of State George P. Shultz and Defense Secretary Caspar W. Weinberger, and a policy-making process beset by drift, paralysis and bureaucratic gridlock across nearly the full range of foreign policy issues.

He said his frustration at a combination of conflict and inaction, and his inability to do anything about it, was a major reason for his abrupt resignation a few days after the November 1985 U.S.-Soviet summit meeting in Geneva.

"The frustration at having to conform to Cabinet government under circumstances in which the Cabinet was in unalterable disagreement . . . suggested to me that perhaps someone else could overcome that, but I couldn't," he said.

Mr. McFarlane said the president's anti-Sandinista policy that began in 1981, his first year in office, was set in motion almost haphazardly, without the rigorous analysis such an important undertaking should have received.

That happened, he said, because at that point no bureaucratic machinery had been established within the administration by which such a broad, intergovernmental review could be made, even though Mr. Haig tried, but failed early on, to set one up.

Mr. Haig's proposal, which he submitted right after Mr. Reagan was inaugurated in January 1981, would have made the State Department the leading agency in forging foreign policy. The White House viewed the proposal as an attempt by the secretary of state to grab power and refused to go along with the idea until much later.

"One can argue with what he proposed, but it is undeniable that something ought to have been established," Mr. McFarlane said. "If they weren't going to accept Al's idea, they should have put something else in place, but the fact is, nothing was put in place except a kind of ad hoc reactive approach to events."

Because the administration lacked the necessary machinery, he continued, the administration "functioned in a vacuum, which was filled by a CIA proposal to endorse covert activity in Nicaragua."

An analysis, had one been conducted, he said, would probably have concluded that the vital interests of the United States were truly threatened by events in Nicaragua, but that covert support for the contras would not solve the problem.

In particular, he said, such a study most likely would have determined that CIA-directed covert activity by the contras would be insufficient to overcome the support the Sandinistas were receiving from the Soviet Union and Cuba.

More fundamentally, he said, it would also have been apparent that generating the support of the American public would have been impossible because "you cannot even talk about the instrument that you founded your policy on, a covert activity."

A system for rigorous analysis of policy options was finally put in place in 1982, Mr. McFarlane said, giving the State Department prima-

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cy as Mr. Haig had desired. But a few months later, Mr. Haig was replaced by Mr. Shultz.

Mr. McFarlane, who moved from the State Department to the White House as deputy national security adviser with the freshly appointed William P. Clark, said the new system showed signs of working under Mr. Haig, but bogged down after Mr. Shultz took over.

The alleged failure occurred across the board, Mr. McFarlane said, not just in the area of Central American policy.

The State Department-managed system, he said, required assistant secretaries of state for various regions of the world to chair interdepartmental meetings — normally involving the State and Defense departments, the CIA and the National Security Council — to generate foreign policy options for the president.

"That just lapsed into disuse," he said.

One problem, he said, was that State Department officials "don't like to argue a lot, they're uncomfortable with conflict."

"So when they had a few shouting matches, they said, 'The hell with that. Why should I subject myself to a Wednesday afternoon brutalization?' " he said.

Conversely, he said, the Defense Department, "which does like conflict, a lot, was frustrated because they never could have any meetings."

The result, he said, was a stalemate in many policy areas as well as the continuation of a "flawed" and later "unachievable" policy toward Nicaragua, which Mr. McFarlane said he found himself incapable of changing.

"I could tell George [Shultz], as I did, 'Look, we are drifting in Central America. You guys have to chair these meetings and begin to kick ass and take names,' " he said. "And they just wouldn't do it."

He said progress eventually occurred in one area, arms control, but only after the National Security Council in 1983 was given primary responsibility for fashioning the policy.

"We used to have those goddamned meetings just daily, every goddamned day, and everybody would have shouting matches," he said. "But we got policy made."